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The Unbearable Lightness of Full Participation in a Global Context: WSIS and Civil Society Participation

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THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF FULL PARTICIPATION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT : WSIS AND CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the involvement of civil society actors in the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) by addressing the dynamics between participation and power. A theoretical model combining Foucault's and Giddens' perspectives on power and resistance is applied to analyse the Summit and its participatory potential towards civil society. The acclaimed participatory nature of the Summit-process (in Geneva), including the preparatory meetings, is evaluated through a comparison of generative, restrictive power mechanisms and the resistance they provoke. Our analysis shows the importance of explicitly dealing with power and power (im)balances when evaluating participatory discourses, specifically in policy contexts. The WSIS process has made a valuable contribution towards increasing civil society's access, interaction and consultation in international regulatory practices, but the power imbalances are still too present to justify the use of the notion of participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Global politics remained up until a few decades ago a restricted area, which was mainly accessible to nation states, and more specifically to the dominant superpowers at that time in history. This has gradually changed and 'new' actors have emerged on the global scene. One concrete manifestation of this is that states and international institutions have adopted a so-called 'multi-stakeholder approach'[1] to global and regional governance, involving more and more business- as well as civil society- actors. The rhetorics that surround these alleged inclusionary practices tend to make use of a very fluid signifier: 'participation'. It is now claimed more and more that civil society, as well as business actors, are 'participating' in the

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[1] This refers to a multi-centred world system where states are no longer the sole actors or stakeholders, but international organizations, business and civil society also play their role in global or regional governance. For more on this see: Rosenau (1990); Hemmati (2002).

global political processes that build future societies. This chapter asserts that these rhetorics are discursive reductions of the plurality of meanings that are embedded in the notion of participation. By confronting these rhetorics on participation with the organizational practices related to a world summit, more specifically the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and its preparatory meetings called PrepComs, we will be able to show that a specific and reductionist definition of participation is produced, which excludes the possibility of a series of more balanced power relations. This analysis illustrates at the same time the problems encountered when (optimistically unprepared) introducing the notion of participation in processes of regional or global governance. It will also show that power remains an important concept that often gets obscured or masked. By making these implicit and explicit power-mechanisms visible this chapter would like to contribute towards the

Before addressing the notion of participation and power and applying this to the case of the WSIS, we need to place consultation of and participation by civil society actors in an

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE PARTICIPATORY TRAJECTORY

One of the concrete results of the globalization processes from the 1990s onwards, was the recognition that nation states were no longer the only players on the international stage (Rosenau, 1990; Zacher, 1992; Sassen, 1999). Civil society actors as well as business actors have manifested themselves increasingly as legitimate actors in processes of global governance. At the same time the number of issues requiring global solutions also increased and became more prominent on the political agendas of citizens, civil society organizations and (some) governments (Urry, 2003; Held, et. al, 1999: 49-52; Beck, 1996). Examples of such issues are child labour, ecology, terrorism, crime, mobility, migration or human rights. In this regard we can also refer to the emergence of transnational notions of citizenship (Van Steenbergen, 1994; Bauböck, 1994; Hauben, 1995; Hutchings & Dannreuther, 1999; Sassen, 2002). This does, however, not mean that transnational issues or transnational networks as such are a totally new phenomenon as Boli and Thomas (1997: 176) have shown in their historical analysis of non-governmental organizations. In this regard can also be referred to the Socialist International or the Suffragette-movement (Geary, 1989; French, 2003). But it is fair to say that the scope and degree of cosmopolitanism has drastically increased in recent decades (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002).

Another observation relates to a crisis of institutional legitimization, be it on the level of the nation state or international/regional organizations. States are caught between the possible and the desired: they have to operate within strict budgetary and legal frameworks, international obligations and co-operative regimes and are at the same time confronted with high citizens' demands, national interests and cultural specificities. International organizations partially build on the legitimacy of their member states, but the more the representative democratic system at the national level is being questioned and debated, the more difficult it has become for international institutions to solely rely on state representatives to formulate policies. In a world of multi-level go

like the instalment of a democratic world parliamen

1968/1296 and ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31[3], establishing a solid legal framework for the partnership between civil society and the UN. Concrete examples of this growing degree of involvement of civil society can be found in development policies (Smillie et. al, 1999; Weiss, 1998), but also in the growing participation of civil society actors in World Summits[4] (UN, 2001b).

By involving civil society, international—as well as national—institutions try to re-establish their legitimacy as operating in the interest of al

3. WHAT IS PARTICIPATION?

Participation is an ideologically loaded and highly contested notion. For instance Pateman (1972: 1) remarks: '*the widespread use of the term […] has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared; 'participation' is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people*'. Different strategies have been developed to cope with this significatory diversity, most of which construct categorization systems. As the illustrations below will show, the element that supports the construction of these systems is the degree to which power is equally distributed among the participants. For this reason, the key concept of power will be addressed in a second part.

3.1. Constructing participation as 'real'

This widespread use (or the floating) of (the signifier) participation has firstly prompted the construction of categorising systems based on the combination of different concepts. In the context of the UNESCO-debates about a 'New World Information and Communication Order' (NWICO)[5] the distinction between access and participation was introduced. While their definition of access stressed the availability of opportunities to choose relevant programs and to have a means of feedback, participation implied '*a higher level of public involvement […] in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems.*' (Servaes, 1999: 85)

decisions but the final <u>power</u> to decide rests with one party only' (Pateman, 1972: 70 - our

Both authors provide room for human agency: in his dialectics of control Giddens (1979: 91) distinguishes between the transformative capacity of power - treating power in terms of the conduct of agents, exercising their free will - on the one hand, and domination - treating power as a structural quality - on the other. This

Figure 1: Foucault's and Giddens' views on power combined
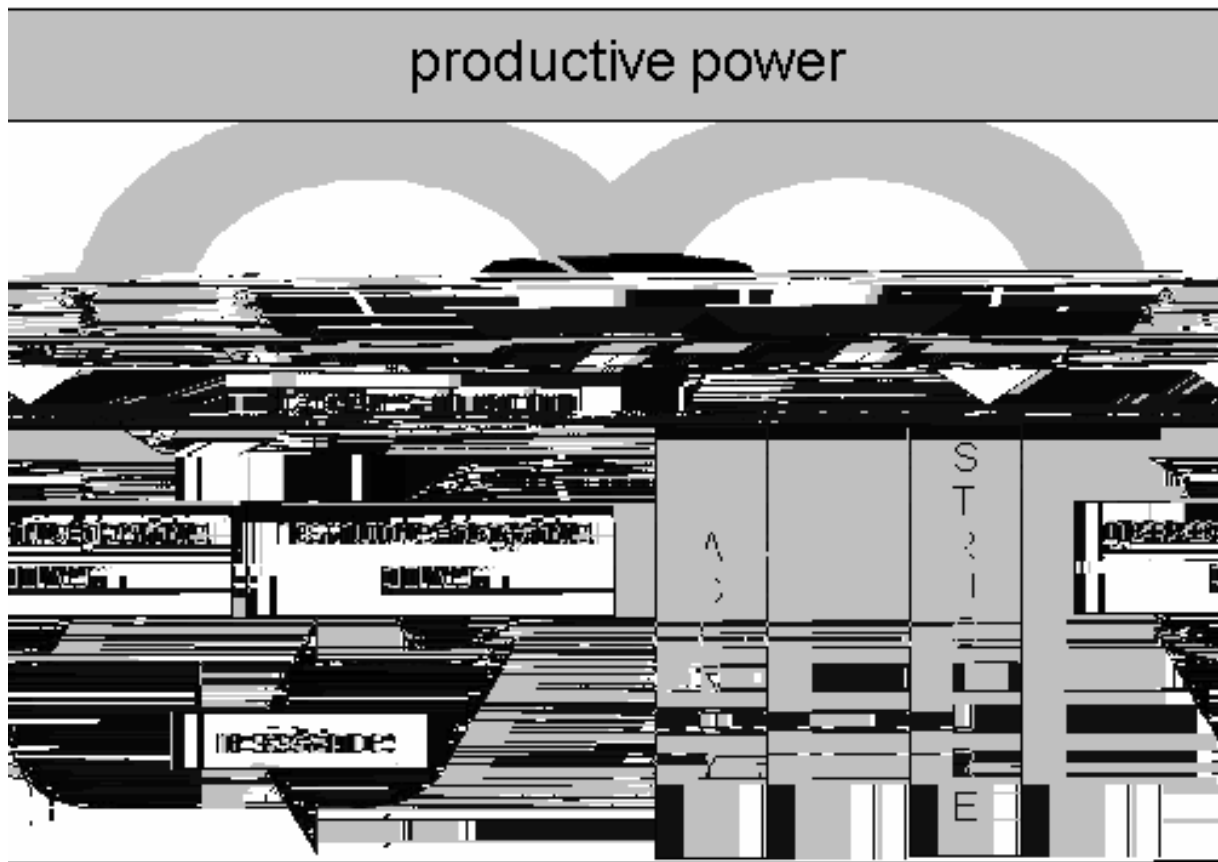
By using this model both the more localized and the more generalized power practices can be taken into account. This also allows us to bypass some of the problems that complicate the use of the notion of participation. Instead of almost unavoidably having to put an exclusive focus on the degree of structuralized participation, this theoretical framework emphasises the importance of localized and fluid (micro)power practices and strategies without ignoring the overall (political) structure. Firstly, this approach also allows stressing the importance of the outcome of this specific combination of generative and restrictive (or repressive) power mechanisms. The overall effect -the discourses, identities and definitions that were produced- will have their impact on future processes. By building on the analysis of the dialectics of control, we moreover argue here that the comparison of the generative and restrictive (or repressive) power mechanisms allows establishing the depth and quality of civil society participation in the WSIS process.

Following Foucault and Giddens we fully realise the existence of unequal power relations, and only use the notion of full participation as a

social praxis, its phantasmagoric realization serves as the breeding grounds for civil society's attempts oriented towards democratization. As the French writer Samuel Beckett of Irish decent once eloquently formulated it

4. ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN THE WSIS AND ITS PREPARATORY PROCESS

In view of its longstanding partnership with NGOs t

Secondly, desk research of the WSIS related websites, official documents/resolutions, as well as evaluation documents drawn-up by key civil society actors will allow us to analyse civil society consultation and participation. Finally, in view of validating our research, a number of key-persons[10] were invited to comment upon a draft version of this chapter.

4.1. Generative/Positive dsfy

from PrepCom3 to the WSIS was much lower, namely about 45 organizations. At the Summit itself attendance of civil society rose to about 3200 members[13] from 453 CSOs.

Figure 2: Inflow, Outflow and Re-inflow of active CSOs[14] in the PrepComs and WSIS-03

Figure 2 and table 1 also show that the re-inflow o

Table 1: Re-inflow & degree of attendance in PrepComs and WSIS 2003 in Geneva

PrepCom PrepCom2
1

Figure 3: Regional distribution of CSOs by type of CSO[15]

The ITU also held 5 regional meetings[16]. Attendance in these regional meetings was quite high. For example, more then 1700 participants[17] were present at the regional meeting in Bamako and as such it can be suggested that this helped in lowering the threshold for access to the WSIS process. Each regional meeting resulted in a declaration highlighting the demands and concerns of that particular region and also produced several documents[18]. In the case of the Bamako regional meeting UNESCO together with the Executive Secretariat also organized a consultation round with African CSOs, which was subsequently reported in a docu77753(d)1.32034(o)1.W77753(d955522.1971(t)6.71787( )-4.77819(d)l)5818819(d)l

4.1.2. Virtual Access to the PrepComs and Summit

Besides the written contributions, all the interven

Besides the formal rules allowing CSO to be present and to present their points of view, there are also clear signs that Summits also play an important role in terms of informal processes (maybe more so then formal) and network practices (Padovani, 2004a). Bridges (2004) refers to this when evaluating the WSIS process:

> *'Simply by bringing so many stakeholder to the same place, WSIS helped stimulate partnerships. [...] Though this type of internation*

restrictive or negative power mechanisms at the lev

construct the difference between civil society and state actors and that limit the CSOs abilities.

Excluding the distant

Although the attendance of the African CSOs was deemed to be relatively high from a generative perspective, Western European civil society actors are still predominantly present. The reasons for this are of course complex and multiple. Our data for example suggests that almost all CSOs from Africa active within WSIS are quite young organizations (end of the 1990s, begin 2000). This confirms work on the recent wave of democratic reforms in Africa (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997). Although difficult to prove within this research design it is conceivable that a lack of resources and experience in terms of global governance play a constraining role. This might explain the gap between the large proportion of African CSOs that showed an interest in the WSIS process and those who actually were able to attend. From all CSOs who have showed an interest in the WSIS process, some 40% came from Africa. Their share drops to 17% when only those CSOs that have been active within the WSIS process are taken into account (cf. Fig. 4). Asia, on the other hand, is clearly under represented. Human rights violations and the many rather authoritarian regimes in Asia could be one explanation for having a negative impact on civil society attendance from that region

European—and to a lesser extent also North American—dominance also shows in the number of participants per organization[23] (cf. Table 3). Most European and North-American

evaluation. In a document relating to the accreditation process drawn-up before PrepCom1 it is stated very generally that:

'The Executive Secretariat will review the relevance of the work of the applicants on the basis of their background and involvement in information society issues.' (WSIS, 2002b)

The Executive Secretariat will communicate its recommendations to the Members States two weeks before the PrepCom. Member States can ask the Executive Secretariat for additional information and if they deem that not all conditions are met or that there is insufficient information, the PrepCom can defer its decision until its next meeting. It has to be remembered in this regard that civil society actors are only observers within the PrepCom and that it is the member states that decide (also with regard to accreditation). Furthermore, the provisions for appeal and the obligation for the Executive Secretariat to communicate the reasons for a negative recommendation to the concerned CSO, as foreseen in ECOSOC re277.008]TaJl-2A6.363 arrSgemeots for (prgrap -), is not mentio

accreditation. AEe (t)-4.77753(a)8(e)8((b)1.320341)-5.07691(e)1.32034( )807.9 (e)1.32101xvampleforgania

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might have a generative connotation, it also proved to be restrictive in its operation. Examples of management through (1) categorization & conflation, (2) separation, and (3)

(3) The third restrictive practice relates to secur

With regard to virtual access there are also a number of constraints that need to be taken into account. First of all there is the digital divide, precisely one of the most important issues

4.3.2. Resistance by business actors

During the PrepComs the number of written contributions by business sector actors, as well as their attendance could be qualified as rather low. In total some 125 companies, consultant firms or organizations representing corporate actors were active during the WSIS process. As table 4 shows business actors have not been very active in formulating their vision on the World information society within the (formal) PrepCom-process. Their absence might be seen as a form of resistance towards possible changes.

It is, however, not unlikely that transnational corporations have other means available to get their views across, through lobbying governments directly or through the operations of so-

4.3.3. Resistance by states

Firstly, we can refer to the resistance of some states against increasing the role of civil society, which was voiced within the formal process and already mentioned above. Secondly, the turnout of heads of state and/or prime ministers at the WSIS-03 in Geneva was also quite meagre. As James Cowling (2003) asserts:

incorrect to see a political summit as a way to decide technological issues' (Gross quoted in Malvern, 2003). The highest US-representative at the Summit, Bush's senior science and technical advisor John Marburger III, emphasized the need for '*supporting technological innovation*', but did not mention the digital divide once during his plenary speech (Swift, 2003). This is problematic as these comments and statements undermined the whole effort of the Summit and devaluated the reached consensus as formulated in the final declaration.

Resistance by states thus takes two contradictory stances. On the one hand by asserting that the WSIS deals with non-political, technological and economical matters, which implies that from a liberal perspective the state(s) should not intervene. On the other hand it is stated that the WSIS is 'not political enough', whereby the political is defined in a minimalist state-centred way, excluding civil society. From both perspectives civil society's role is discredited. The former interpretation excludes civil society, as the market is supposed to regulate itself and the latter interpretation excludes civil society because it is considered 'not-representative', and thus not politically legitimate.

5. CONCLUSION

The process of the WSIS, seen as a dialectics of control where generative, restrictive and resisting power mechanisms are at play, has 'produced' a series of outcomes. Following our Foucauldian perspective (which resulted in the inclusion of the fourth component in our theoretical model: production) these outcomes are the result of the unique combination of strategies and power games of all actors involved, without remaining blind for their embeddedness in clearly unequal power structures. Next to the more material output, such as the documents, the Summit has also produced (new or perpetuated) inter-actor

WSIS as well as other summits (despite the UN's efforts to rethink civil society participation[32])
will end in an NWICO/UNESCO-scenario of very ambitious goals and critical assessments,
but no political—nor economical—will to actually turn even the watered down declaration into
a political reality.

Finally, in democratic decision-making participation is unavoidably regulated, ideally aimed at
respecting diversity and allowing all voices to be heard. At the same time a well-considered
balance always needs to be struck between participation and efficiency in decision-making.
Although unnecessarily reverting to a discourse of efficiency should be avoided, the role of
efficiency should not be underestimated nor problematised. As was discussed earlier, the
notion of full participation is intrinsically linked to the idea that an equal distribution of power
is an imaginary or a most probably never-to-be-place. It serves as a beacon to fuel social
struggles, to keep the debate alive and to keep the signposts moving in the direction of the
never-to-be-reached utopia (Enwezor, 2002). Our analysis has shown that the use of a
reductionist definition of participation has created high expectations that could not be met.
Above all, this has produced frustration, lingering dangerously close to disengagement,
which we still believe to be the opposite of what was intended by involving civil society
organisations.

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